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ABSTRACT

In analyzing literary works within a conceptual framework, the student needs the freedom to choose from a variety of critical standpoints and to discover for himself various approaches to the literary symbol. To illustrate the necessity of movement from one theory to another, the theories are arranged in the following order: transcendental theory of archetypes, Aristotelian and Platonic realism, intentionalism, contextualism, pragmatism, and positivism. The rationale for the arrangement of the theories on a critical continuum is that it provides a conceptual structure for discussion about disparate theories of symbolism and illustrates how problems introduced by one mode of criticism can be handled by shifting to another critical approach. (RB)

Perspectives 1-20

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THEORIES OF SYMBOLISM: A PLURALISTIC APPROACH TO TEACHING LITERATURE

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In the field of literature, one of the most baffling problems confronting the student is the interpretation of the literary symbol. How, for example, is he expected to learn that Moby Dick represents evil? Or a projection of Ahab's consciousness? Or a phallus, or eternal life? Are all of these interpretations equally valid? If so, on what grounds? What criteria should the student apply in interpreting the literary symbol? What criteria should the teacher adopt in teaching the concept of symbolism?

There are a number of alternative approaches for the teacher to adopt. He could teach one view of symbolism and exclude all others. But this might seem a bit dogmatic. He could try to teach every view under the sun, at the risk of confusing the student. He could forget what he knows about literary symbolism and let the student discover what he may. But if the latter approach is adopted, where does the responsibility of the teacher to offer criticism begin?

I submit that it is not only possible but desirable to involve students with a number of alternative critical approaches to literary symbolism. These approaches need not be presented randomly. I further submit that any theory of literary symbolism, whether presented directly to the student in a deductive fashion, or whether discovered by the student through a process of inquiry, can be placed in a

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structure which undergirds the processes of symbolism. The value of identifying such a structure has been summarized by Bruner in The Process of Education.

Bruner argues that "at least four general claims can be made for teaching the fundamental structure of a subject. (1) That understanding fundamentals makes a subject more comprehensible, (2) That unless detail is placed into a structured pattern, it is rapidly forgotten, (3) [That] an understanding of fundamental principles...appears to be the main road to adequate transfer of training, and (4) That by constantly reexamining material... for its fundamental character, one is able to narrow the gap between 'advanced' knowledge and 'elementary' knowledge."

If Bruner is correct about the value of placing data in a conceptual structure, then any structure which is common to theories of literary symbolism should be useful in making sense out of the great variety of approaches one may take in interpreting the literary symbol. With such an approach we may hope to escape dogmatism of proclaiming one position absolutely correct and the intellectual anarchy of saying anything goes.

First of all, it is possible to group theories of literary symbolism in a kind on continuum, ranging from the metaphysical to the scientific. In so doing, criteria for each theory of symbolism can be examined and its adequacy for describing data noted. A theory of literary symbolism is adequate insofar as its initial assumptions account for the data examined. A theory becomes inadequate when it is used to explain more data than is warranted by its assumptions.

To explain such data, it becomes necessary to move to another theory of symbolism.

To illustrate the necessity of movement from one theory to another, I have adopted the following order for discussion: transcendental theory of archetypes, Aristotelian and Platonic realism, intentionalism, contextualism, pragmatism, and positivism. The order could be otherwise. One could reverse it or start in the middle. The rationale of the critical continuum is that it provides a conceptual structure for talking about disparate theories of symbolism and illustrates, in an almost incremental sense, how problems introduced by one mode of criticism can often be handled best by shifting to another mode of criticism. Thus I start with the transcendental and procede to the positivistic.

The transcendental approach to symbolism is well represented by Emerson, who in his essay "The Poet" says that "things admit of being used as symbols because nature is a symbol..." Emerson's fundamental assumptions in defining the symbol are grounded in Neo-Platonism. "All form," he says, "is an effect of character, all condition, of the quality of the life, all harmony, of health..." From the notion that all form is grounded or conditioned by an essential nature of the univerese as good, Emerson concludes that "everything in nature answers to a moral power." Also, it is the fault of man's perceptual powers if he cannot see the moral power of nature, says Emerson--even the common man.

Since nature is a symbol, "in the whole, and in every part," it is not surprising to find that the coachman values riding, and that the hunter values his dogs.

All such people, says Emerson, are participating in "beauty not explicable." It is because we so enjoy participating in the supernatural that we are driven to the use of emblems and symbols to communicate the ineffable: "...See the power of national emblems. Some stars, lilies, leopards, a crescent, a lion, an eagle, or other figure which came into credit God knows how, on an old rag of bunting, blowing in the wind on a fort at the ends of the earth, shall make the blood tingle under the rudest or the most conventional exterior. The people fancy they hate poetry, and they are all poets and mystics." Thus Emerson accounts for the use of the symbol in much the same way that mystics argue for the necessity of finding a non-finite language to express insights obtained in the mystical experience. Ordinary language will not convey their experiences.

Carlyle also falls into the transcendentalist's camp. Like Wordsworth, who disliked "that false secondary power that multiplies distinction," Carlyle dismisses our "Logical Mensurative Faculty" in favor of our "Imaginative" one. In answer to the Benthamites, who explained the value of literature on a pleasure-pain basis, Carlyle asks: "Can you grind me out a virtue from the husks of pleasure?" Carlyle takes a Neo-Kantian view of the world and engrafts his metaphysical vision of the world to his theory of symbolism. <u>In Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Tuefelsdroch</u>, Carlyle has his amiable Professor maintain that

"the Universe is one vast symbol of God.,,, (that) man himself is a symbol of God."

Carlyle makes a distinction between what he calls extrinsic and intrinsic symbols. Extrinsic symbols are accidental. They grow out of a kind of herd instinct that people have to gather together. In this category Carlyle would place Emerson's common man. "Under such symbolism," says Carlyle, "has stood and can stand the stupidest hearldic Coat of arms military banners everywhere--. The symbol of the necessity to band together reflects only a glimmer of the Divine idea of duty."

The intrinsic symbol, on the other hand, is presented in the great works of art. This symbol reflects the Divinity; "it is the Godlike rendered visible." The poet, the artist, the prophet, are necessary to convey, in symbolic terms, the depth of being. Because the intrinsic symbol is a true representation of the Godlike, it is fit that men should gather about it and value it in itself. It does not have the arbitrary nature of the herd symbol.

For both Emerson and Carlyle, the symbol is grounded in a reality which is not arbitrary. In Emerson's case the reality is God, Divinity, absolute reality, or what you will. Emerson's absolute is like a Divine ray fluxing through puppy dogs, chairs, tables, light bulbs, whatever there is. In Carlyle's case the absolute symbol, the highest conceivable symbol, is Christ.

As a method of explaining symbolism, transcendentalis, tells us more about the necessity of symbolism than

it tells of the nature of the symbol itself. When Carlyle or Emerson, for example, tell us that the symbol is that which reflects the nature of God, we know no more than what we have started with, for we are left with the rather baffling problem of defining God. Is there any way, we may ask, of providing an adequate definition of the symbol, without necessarily binding that definition to a deity of any sort? Such a position, the theory of archetypes, is advanced by Maud Bodkin.

In her Archetypal Patterns in Poetry, she maintains that symbolism used in poetry and in religious writing can be explained without positing the notion of a deity of any sort. She begins with a modified form of Jung's hypothesis that each generation has "a pattern stamped upon their physical organism which is inherited in the structure of the brain:"

> Where forms are assimilated from the environment upon slight contact only, predisposing factors must be present in the mind and brain....in poetry --and here we are to consider in particular tragic poetry--we may identify themes having a particular form or pattern which persists amid variation from age to age, and which corresponds to a pattern or configuration of emotional tendencies in the mind of those who are stirred by them.

The racial memory of man (the predisposing factors in his brain) may be reinforced through poetry. Images of particular forms stir us deeply because they have been reinforced by poets and prophets in successive generations of the past.

As an example, the serpent has through many generations come to symbolize the horror that both an actual serpent and uncontrolled sexuality inspire in us. The following passage from Milton's Paradise Lost illustrates this point:

> they, fondly thinking to allay
> Their appetite with gust, instead of fruit
> Chewed bitter ashes, which the offended taste
> With spattering noise rejected; oft they assayed,
> Hunger and thirst constraining; drugged as oft,
> With hatefullest disrelish writhed their jaws,
> With soot and cinders filled...

According to Bodkin, such passages as this bring to life in us the racial memory, or excite the "predisposing factors" within us which correspond to the particular archetype. Some of the other archetypes that she deals with are rebirth, heaven, and hell; the image of the hero, of woman, of God; demoniac evil, destiny; images of man, of the storm, of flowing water, of the moon, of buried corn, and the color red. All of these and more, if placed in a suitable context, evoke responses from our racial memory.

Probably one of the first to formulate a theory of the symbol as an archetype was D. H. Lawrence. In his The Dragon of the Apocalypse, written in 1930, he says, "You can't give a symbol a 'meaning', anymore than you can give a cat a 'meaning'." Lawrence goes on to say that an allegorical image has a meaning but that he defies anyone to lay his finger on the full meaning of the Janus, who is a symbol.

In order to define the symbol, Lawrence first makes a

distinction between allegory and myth. "Allegory," he says, "is a narrative description using, as a rule, images to express certain definite qualities." Each image means something and is a term in an argument having a moral or didactic purpose. Then Lawrence defines the myth:

> Myth likewise is descriptive narrative using images. But myth is never an argument, it never has a didactic nor a moral purpose, you can draw no conclusion from it. Myth is an attempt to narrate a whole human experience, of which the purpose is too deep, going too deep in the blood and soul, for mental explanation or description.

The reason we are baffled when we attempt to give a meaning to a symbol is that the symbol is an image of a myth. According to Lawrence, "the power of the symbol is to arouse the deep emotional self...beyond comprehension." The symbol does this by bringing the deeper self into contact with centuries of past experience. For this reason no man can invent a symbol. He can invent metaphors, images, even emblems, but not symbols. In this way Lawrence is able to explain the difference between the emblem and the symbol, a feat Emerson did not attempt and which Carlyle did only inadequately.

That the symbol and the image are not the same, but that they are not categorically mutually exclusive, is a point Tillich seems to take credit for in his Theology of Culture. And yet, Lawrence propounded this very point in 1930.

> Some images, in the course of many generations of men, become symbols, embedded in the soul and ready

> to start alive when touched, carried on in the human consciousness for centuries.

Here Lawrence may be disparaging those who would not recognize his particular mythos. On the other hand, he could be saying that social values can change to such an extent that individuals can no longer see past values reflected in terms of symbols.

"Symbols don't mean. They stand for units of human feeling." This I will grant, along with the notion that the meaning of a myth is inexhaustible. If, however, one carries the Laurentian aesthetic to an extreme, he may find it convenient to avoid discussion of symbolism by mouthing something as follows: "Oh, you just have to feel it in your deeper consciousness and if you can't, why what an Ox you are!" At such a point I think the advice of Charles Child Walcutt appropriate:

> Properly grasped, it (the symbol) is there to be felt rather than argued about. But argument is necessary and fruitful if it can be directed to show the follies of private improvisations as a living incarnate idea. The nature of the symbol is the nature of poetry. The special quality of each is that it is powerfully concrete and yet suggests more than can be logically accounted for, because it enjoys a dimension of felt thought which cannot be reproduced by the phrases which attempt to describe it.

Walcutt's statement doesn't mean that we cannot approximate the "dimension of felt thought" without feeble phrases. One never knows, for instance, when he may use just the right metaphor which will give another person a clue to grasping the symbol.

The transcendental interpretation and the archetypal interpretation of symbolism respectively necessitate the acceptance of theological claims and ontological claims. I wish now to move to a position which attempts to explain the literary symbol in formal philosophical terms--that of the Platonic or Aristotelian realist. Such a view is represented by Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Coleridge defines the symbol in terms of universal and particular characteristics:

> ...a symbol...is characterized by the translucence of the special in the individual, or of the general in the special, or of the universal in the general; above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal. It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity of which it is the representative.

The fact that a symbol can stand for itself and something more besides is explained here by virtue of the fact that particulars participate in the universal, which is the art form. This method of explaining the symbol at least shows why one has so difficult a problem in pinning down a particular meaning for a symbol. To the formist, the symbol is not a particular, though it may appear to be so because it is a single symbol. It is more like a class, and being a class it must contain more than a single instance.

All the methods of analyzing the symbol have thus far been metaphysical in character. The transcendental method posits the necessary existence of Divinity; the archetypal method requires the acceptance of racial consciousness; the Aristotelian and Platonist must presuppose that there are such things as universals. All of these

methods, in other words, necessitate the acceptance of the intangible, the abstract, the unobservable, the sort of notions that are disconcerting to the positivist. Before examining what the positivist has to say about the matter, however, I should like to discuss a number of intermediary positions.. I now procede to a theory of symbolism which is less metaphysical than any of the foregoing theories. This position, intentionalism, tends to be psychologically based rather than metaphysically based.

Edmund Wilson argues that every feeling we have, every sensation or idea, is different from every other; and in consequence of this it is impossible to convey to the reader precisely what one imagines. At least it is impossible to convey one's meaning in ordinary language. Thus it is that symobls are needed to convey one's personal experience. This approach recognizes that one has experiences which are perhaps ineffable, which may not be easily delineated in ordinary language, but it does not maintain that these ineffable experiences must necessarily derive some transcendental region such as Emerson's oversoul.

Wilson, then, defines symbolism as an act, as a creative process:

> And Symbolism may be defined as an attempt by carefully studied means--a complicated association of ideas represented by a medley of metaphors--to communicate unique personal feelings.

If the symbols and the metaphors set up associative patterns in the mind of the reader which correspond to those in the writer's mind then the symbolism will have been a success.

Robert Frost places a kind of ethical value on the poet's ability to convey his experiences accurately. "The bard has said in effect, Unto these forms did I commend my spirit. Later, says Frost, he may have to admit that he did betray the spirit with a "rhymster's cleverness." It is for this reason that Frost defines the poem as a symbol and explains both in terms of intention:

> Every single poem written regular is a symbol small or great of the way the will has to pitch into commitments deeper and deeper to a rounded conclusion and then be judged for whether any original intention it had had been strongly spent or weakly lost..

Here Frost is making a case for individualism. The poet must decide what convictions he shall be true to and then find the words which best express his predicament, for every poem say Frost is "a figure of the will braving alien entanglements."

In Edmund Wilson's and Frost's theories of symbolism, the symbol may be viewed in terms of the creative process. The reality of the symbol in this case will depend on the correspondence of it with the intent of the poet. And from the point of view of the intentionalist the source of the author's intent is not important--what is important is to convey the intent as well as can be done. This method of viewing the symbol has the advantage (or perhaps disadvantage) of dismissing with metaphysical notions which cannot be checked. The symbol becomes a device for indicating the patterns, forms, and associations, which constitute the intent of the author. The theory is psychologically oriented; the author can check what he has produced against his original intent.

One may wonder, however, as Wimsatt and Beardsley wondered how the critic, looking at the work of art from outside the writer's mind, can know the writer's intent. Should one go outside the poem for evidence? "Why should we have to do this?" say Wimsatt and Beardsley? If the poet succeeded in his intention, then the poem itself will show what he was trying to do. If he did not, then the poem is not adequate evidence by which one can determine the author's intent. It is for these reasons that Wimsatt and Beardsley recommend placing emphasis on the work itself. If the intent is present, then the context will reveal it. It is this approach to literature which leads one to the next method of defining the literary symbol, that of contextualism.

In general, the contextualist asserts that the words a rose, a storm, a tree, mean nothing in themselves. They must be placed in a context before they take on meaning. According to Abrams, in his article "Symbol, from a Glossary of Literary Terms," the meaning of a rose is perfectly arbitrary. Placed in the context of Robert Burns' lines "O my love's like a red, red rose," however, the rose takes on significance through metaphor. On the other hand, "the rose" takes on symbolic significance through word association, not through metaphor, when it is placed in the context of William Blake's poem, The Sick Rose:

O Rose, thou art sick!
The invisible worm
that flies in the night,
in the howling storm,

Has found out thy bed
of crimson joy,
and his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

According to Abrams, it is only through the association of the rose with words like "bed", "joy", and "love", which give to the rose a meaning beyond that of a flower. The rose does not function as an archetype in Blake's poem It is not "the rose of Dante's Paradisio" for example. In Blake's poem it is a worm-eaten rose, symbolizing "furitiveness, deceit, and hypocrisy in what should be frank and joyous relationship of physical love."

In contextual criticism, our criterion for deciphering the symbol is association. The surrounding environment shapes the symbol. And yet, this criterion may be too nebulous when the context is broadened. Should one consider paragraphs, sentences, whole works? In Paradise Lost, how much of the work should be considered to decipher the symbolic import of the tree of knowledge? The whole work? Should each part be given equal weight? If not, how does one decide on priorities? Is there not some stricter method of verifying symbolic reference? Something more scientific? The aesthetics of pragmatism or instrumentalism claim to provide such a method. Hence, I now apply this method to literature.

The pragmatic approach is represented by Dewey, who argues that the symbol is known to us through our behavior. Dewey regards all words which represent objects and actions as symbols. All symbols have a meaning, but the meaning is not in the symbols themselves:

> A sign board has meaning when it says so many miles to such and such a place...Meaning does not belong to the sign board of its own intrinsic right.... meanings present themselves directly as possessions of objects which are experienced...the meaning is inherent in immediate experience...

Here Dewey is moving very close to a positivists position in explaining meaning. Symbols must have explicit reference. This is fairly clear when we stop for a red light or start for a green one, but the contemplation of the whale in Moby Dick is another matter.

The only way Dewey's aesthetics can handle this sort of symbol is to connect it with a context which causes the individual to act. But if meditative acts are real only in terms of the practical consequences to which they lead, how shall we act out our contemplation of the whale? And if it is the case, as Dewey maintains, that practical consequences enable us to distinguish the ideas which initiated them, how are we to distinguish between the practical consequences of a gentleman who holds that the whale is a symbol of Satanic evil and another who holds that the whale is a phallic symbol.

Charles W. Morris, who mediates between the pragmatists' and the behaviorists' positions, has recently labeled the literary symbol as an icon. Morris is at least admitting his inability to deal with the literary symbol on completely empirical grounds and is honestly setting it aside as a rather cumberson enterprise. I think, however, that the word icon, which usually means image, may cause more confusion than clarification.

In examining the positivist's position one may ask what can be done with the problem of meaning if he adopts a purely scientific point of view in analyzing the literary symbol. According to I. A. Richards, language is either referential or non-referential. If it is referential then it is rightfully called symbolic. If it is non-referential in the strict scientific sense then it is emotive language and cannot be regarded as having meaning. It may be pleasurable, as Richards admits poetry certainly is, but it cannot mean anything; it is at most a system of pseudo-symbols.

Richards sets up the following test to determine whether language is referential or emotive:

1. Is the statement true of false in the ordinary strict scientific sense?
2. If this question is relevant then the use is referential. If it is clearly irrelevant then we have an emotive utterance.

It is obvious that the literary symbol, which refers beyond itself is not true or false in the strict scientific sense. Nevertheless, if one accepts Richard's dichotomy he may not like the idea of having to assign the literary symbol to the second category, that of emotive language, and therefore non-meaningful language.

Susan Langer has accused I. A. Richards of setting up a false dichotomy. Language, she says, is not logically divided into the referential and the emotive. Non-referential language is the

proper antithesis of referential language. Moreover, it is perfectly conceivable for emotive language to be referential, perhaps not in the "strict scientific sense," but then why should language be restricted to scientific categories?

We have come full circuit, from metaphysical interpretations of the literary symbol to scientific interpretations. We have passed from a theological approach to the problem, propounded by Emerson and Carlyle, to ontological and formistic approaches, expounded by the archetypal symbolist and the Aristotelian realist. We have seen that some rather nebulous problems arise for the reader if he attempts to ground the definition of a symbol in the intent of the author. We moved to the contextual approach, and thence to the pragmatic, but the problem of clarification of meaning led to a consideration of I. A. Richard's positivistic position. Here we are left with what Langer calls a false dichotomy between referential language and emotive language.

I have tried to show how each critical theory stands in need of qualification--how one can raise questions pointing to the inadequacy of any one position to cover all problems of symbolism. My own view is that no one critical position is encompassing enough to define the literary symbol in terms of all possible vantage points, but that for purposes of achieving a pluralistic view of the literary symbol, it is convenient to group aesthetic and critical theories in a continuum ranging from the metaphysical to the positivistic.

Such a continuum provides a conceptual framework whereby any theory of literary criticism can be described in relation to any other such theory. In analyzing any literary data, be it a poem, a novel or a play, the analysis of symbolism may be preceded by such questions as--"To what extent does the given data demand a metaphysical analysis? To what extent can metaphysical assumptions be avoided? Where on the symbol continuum would the literary data of this particular work fall? On what grounds?"

By adopting such a structured approach to a variety of literary theories, one can maintain emphasis on evidence for any given literary analysis, thus avoiding randomness. One can at the same time avoid the dogmatism of a single approach to the literary symbol--one which will in all likelihood exclude certain kinds of literary evidence.

Within such a conceptual framework the student is given the freedom to choose from a variety of critical standpoints--and indeed--to discover for himself various approaches to the literary symbol, as well as perhaps create some approaches on his own. But in such a framework he is forced to face the problem of evidence. Critical theories are not equally valid for all purposes--and unravelling the possible meanings of literature is neither a guessing game where one must learn to psyche the teacher to discover "the real meaning"--(the real meaning by the way, is hidden within concrete and steel vaults and only the teacher and a few chosen critics know)--nor is the analysis of literature a matter of critical roulette. If this were so, no books need be opened, no evidence examined, no counter arguments presented.

Literature becomes reduced to a device which mirrors one's ego. The teacher plays therapist using literary works as simulated Rorschach tests.

The critical continuum provides another way. There is this matter of evidence. And there are different kinds of evidence. There are different starting points, different circuit patterns for unwinding and different ending points. From the point of view of Christian orthodoxy, D. H. Lawrence's "snake" may be a symbol of evil; from an Eastern point of view, a symbol of wisdom; from a psychoanalytic point of view, a symbol of male sexuality; from a strictly Lawrentian point of view, an Orphic god. And yet, each mode of interpreting this symbol can be developed with integrity.

To sum up, the critical continuum would hopefully avoid the extremes of dogmatism and intellectual anarchy. It could contribute to identifying structure in knowledge--namely, transfer of learning, retention, reducing the gap between advanced and elementary knowledge, and, I think most important, providing a framework for making sense out of an enormous range of disparate views regarding the literary symbol--and thereby developing within the student the critical acumen to articulate where he stands when he opts for any particular view.